

whatever you say by kennysspace

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almost paradise: part three - chapter five

the summer of '85 means new jobs, new friends, and the return of old enemies.

whatever you say

this is also being updated to my tumblr. you can find it [here](#). also i am so sorry that there hasn't been an update in almost five months! hopefully i can start posting more soon, so thank you for your patience!

Sections of the pool are coated in a layer of pollen and tree branches - Steve's neglected to take care of it over the past few weeks.

He thought about Barb the last time he tried.

Not knowing exactly how she died is the worst part of it. He knows Nancy feels the same way. His mind often conjures up scenarios that feed off of his guilt; each one begins with him asking them to that stupid party, and they end with the Holland girl decaying in the Upside Down.

Steve hasn't told you about that. He doesn't want to burden you anymore - you have enough to worry about.

"When do you leave?" Steve asks, pulling at the weeds that grew between the patio tiles. It's a desperate attempt to rid his mind of the previous thought.

Without looking up from the textbook in your lap, you reply, "Probably the end of August, I'm not sure exactly."

Steve's brow creases. That's barely three months away. Damn, he thought there was more time.

He's been trying to convince himself that this isn't going to be as difficult as he thinks. It's only Chicago - it's just a two hour drive; but you've only been just down the street. The suburbs won't be the same without you. Watching you race your brother to the stop sign is the highlight of his morning.

After Steve doesn't say anything for a few seconds, your eyes move up to land on him; his expression is devoid of emotion. He shifts

under your gaze, uncomfortable with the sensation of your scrutiny, “I just... now that you're goin', what do you think's going to happen to us?”

His question takes you off guard. You weren't expecting him to want to talk about something like that. A sigh passes your lips as your back straightens, “I haven't really thought about it.”

Steve simply nods; your mind is filled to the brim with more important matters, he thinks.

The textbook is closed and placed to the side before you turn a bit closer to him - your knee brushes his as you move.

“What do *you* think we should do?” You ask, leaning back on your palms. The blades of grass caress your skin as your focus remains solely on him.

Steve shrugs, stomach filled with butterflies. He's not sure he wants to hear or give an answer, but he knows for sure that he'd never forgive himself for losing you again. His feelings for you are so much stronger than he ever thought they could be - he'd be willing to do anything to help you move on.

He often wonders if his presence helps or hinders you. He serves as a constant reminder of what you've survived.

The right thing to do would be to let you go.

“I don't know,” Steve states plainly.

Your irises hold a sadness in them; he can see it when his eyes move to meet yours. You force a deep exhale through your lungs at Steve's words. The pair of you share a mutual understanding with what he implies.

This was easier when you both were planning on attending college. Visiting each other on your respective campuses was better than having to return to Hawkins. You both would begin lives elsewhere, away from the horrors that are drawn to this town.

You were never going to be able to separate yourselves from Hawkins

entirely - your family and friends are here. But now Steve's here. Now everything is here.

Steve pulls his gaze from you; frustration is beginning to build up inside him. He can't believe that after everything you two have been through, he's actually considering ending things.

Then he notices how quietly you sit beside him, with your brows furrowed and bottom lip firmly between your teeth as you think. He can't fathom not being able to look to his side and see you there. Or how it would feel to blast Queen and not hear your voice singing from the passenger's side. Or how empty he would feel if he couldn't pull you closer when your scream echoes through his head at night.

He doesn't think he could ever stop loving you, even if this doesn't last. In one way or another, you'll always be partners; your fates are intertwined by tragedy.

"I can't really imagine myself without you anymore," Steve mutters.

A beat passes as his words settle. Steve's right - you don't know how it's going to feel to be apart from each other. Would severing the tie make it easier?

You reply softly, "Me either."

The corner of Steve's mouth curls upwards at your agreement. Either decision the pair of you make is bittersweet. But one seems harder to swallow than the other.

"Maybe nothing has to happen," You say, leaning over to rest your head onto his shoulder. Steve relaxes a bit at your touch, but doubt still floods his mind, "You really think we'd be able to do that?"

"The campus is only a couple hours from here," You add before reaching for his hand. The pads of your fingers against his palm helps ease the pain. His fingers intertwine with yours as you continue, "I can come here some weekends to visit. And there's the phone, of course. We can talk every night."

Steve can't lie - he hates the idea. It's so selfish of him, but he wishes that you weren't going. He wishes that you weren't getting out of this

town, leaving him here. The thought of only getting to see you for a select few hours every weekend, or only being able to hear your voice... his frown grows even more.

But then he remembers how good this is going to be for you. Out of the pair of you, you've had the hardest time adjusting. This was a life that neither of you wanted, but you certainly weren't made for this.

Leaving Hawkins is the best decision you could've made. Steve doesn't want to try and hold you back from moving on. And if only getting to spend a fraction of his time with you is the sacrifice he has to make, he'd choose that option over nothing any day.

With a deep exhale, he finally replies, "I hope you know that I'll be expecting you to read me a bedtime story over the phone."

You roll your eyes before pulling away, "I'm not reading you a bedtime story."

Steve admires the beaming smile coming from your direction. He pretends to be annoyed, his lips pouting, "Fine."

You're laughing a bit, and then he is too. Everything feels okay for a moment. All you can think is how lucky you are to have someone like him, because you can tell that it's only going to get harder for the two of you.

While Steve's sad (and a little terrified) to see you leave Hawkins, he knows it's for the best. He firmly believes that you're meant to leave this forsaken place, as much as he wishes he didn't have to watch you go.

"You're gonna do great out there, you know?"

Your eyes dart back to land on him. Even though his voice was genuine, a piece of you still fears this. You fear failure, fear losing him to the distance. But Steve believes in you - part of that feels like enough.

Your smile relaxes with the sincerity of his words, "You really think so?"

Steve scoffs, shrugging like it's obvious, "You kiddin' me? They're not gonna know what hit 'em."

A pink tint flushes your cheeks when his gaze shifts to focus on you. Your heart swells at the sense of comfort, and you lean forwards to press a quick kiss to his lips. When you pull away, it becomes quite clear that leaving Hawkins will be tougher than you thought. As your summer begins, how much more difficult will saying goodbye become?

Soon after Dustin left for Camp Know Where, you and Steve chose to slowly begin the process of revealing your relationship. Now that the pair of you have graduated high school, you're spending more time together than ever before. In order to avoid any awkward conversations, you figured it would be best to tell your mother first.

Her smile was just as wide as yours while you told her the news. It brought her such joy to see you emanating such unapologetic happiness. From the first moment she had met Steve, she knew it was only a matter of time before your relationship grew into something more.

Even though the discussion with your mom went well, you and Steve unanimously decided not to tell another soul until your brother's return. With Dustin's consistent efforts to get you two together, he deserves to know before any of the others. Finding out he was the last to know of your love would crush him.

Now that Steve has a plethora of free time, you recommended that he apply for a job. Steve's not totally against scooping ice cream for a living; there are worse things to do. But the uniform makes it so much worse.

"Well?" Steve asks, placing his hands on his hips. You press your lips into a firm line; you're trying desperately not to laugh. The corners of your mouth curl upwards, giving it away nonetheless.

"It's... not the worst outfit in the world," You reply, lying through your teeth as you lean your weight against the door frame. Everything about the sailor inspired ensemble makes you thankful that you didn't turn in an application, "The shorts are a little rough

though.”

Steve rolls his eyes as a giggle finally passes from between your lips, “This thing is so stupid. I can’t believe I have to wear this.”

“It’s not that bad, Steve. You’ll be fine,” You say, offering more encouragement before catching the time off your watch. Shit, you’re gonna be late.

He huffs as you step closer to fix his hair, “Besides, I think you look handsome.”

“Yeah yeah, okay you’re just sayin’ that,” Steve brushes off your compliment, but he can’t hide the light blush that floods his face. You press your lips to his cheek for a quick kiss and move to grab your belongings.

“You know I mean it,” You reply casually, yanking your hoodie over your head. Steve hands you your bag, “Sure you don’t want a ride over?”

“I think I can manage,” You tease, sliding your arms through the straps on the backpack, “I’ll stop by after my shift to make sure you haven’t killed anyone.”

“No promises,” Steve mutters after you pull him in for a goodbye kiss.

The business at the Radio Shack on Main Street had been diminishing for months before the store’s closure. Starcourt Mall began draining downtown Hawkins of its profits from the moment the doors opened a few weeks ago. Instead of transferring to the new location inside of the mall, you took it as an opportunity to find a different job for the summer. You would’ve taken any job that distanced you from the memory of your deceased co-worker, but an opening at the local pool seemed too good to pass up.

You can already tell that it’s going to be a rough shift before you even manage to park your bike. Families have already begun claiming their seats for the day, filling the humid morning breeze with shouts between parents and their children. Even more cars

continue to filter into the parking lot as you enter through the back door, and it's barely 9 o'clock.

You're thankful for the umbrella above the lifeguard chair, you couldn't imagine completing this shift with the sun beating down on the swimmers like it is. Someone's portable radio echoes the verse of a pop song across the water until it reaches your ears; your foot moves through the air in time with the beat. If it wasn't a song that you adore, you'd tell them to shut it off.

Your peace is suddenly interrupted by a voice from below the chair, "You have any extra sunscreen?"

Peering over the top of your sunglasses, your head turns to see Mike with his arms crossed over his chest. He's grown so tall over the past couple months; you barely have to look down to meet his eye line.

Max joins him as soon as you reach for the bottle. She brings a hand up to shield her eyes from the midday sun, "Maybe a hair tie too?"

You laugh a bit at the added request - it isn't like her to forget to bring a spare or two. She thanks you after you hand her the band from your wrist, "Lucas and Will flung mine at each other and lost them in the bushes."

Mike rolls his eyes as she leaves, earning him a rather scathing glare from you. You've never appreciated the attitude he develops around the redhead.

"I'm surprised to see you here," You say, adjusting in the uncomfortable seat; the plastic sticks to your skin. Mike's scowl grows, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't you usually spend every waking moment with El?"

The boy counters swiftly, "You're one to talk."

Your gaze, which had drifted ahead to the pool, shifts back to him. Even with your face partially obscured by the dark frames, the dirty look still carries the same effect. A curt reply follows, your voice no longer containing a teasing tone, "That's different."

Mike sarcastically hums in agreement, nodding slightly, “Whatever you say.”

In an effort to end the conversation and get him out of your sight, you finally hand him the sunscreen he requested. The corner of his mouth curls up with mischievousness as he takes the bottle from you.

“Those his sunglasses?” Mike asks, gesturing to the pair you’re wearing.

You sigh with annoyance, but a slight smile begins to form at his bluntness. He enjoys keeping this secret a bit too much. You push the plastic shades farther up your nose, “I have the power to ban you from the pool, you know.”

With your thinly-veiled threat, Mike utters a goodbye before bolting across the concrete. He doesn’t get very far before he hears the bright sound of your whistle. The megaphone crackles to life as you raise it to your mouth, “No running on the deck, Michael.”

Lucas, Will, and Max burst into harmonious laughter.

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As soon as your replacement arrives to take your place, you become eager to head over to Starcourt. You’ve had enough of Mike’s shenanigans to last you a week. Heather Holloway spots you from the lifeguard station on your way out, and she waves you over to say hello.

Neither of you had met prior to being co-workers, but she’s a nice girl. It’s not surprising that you’ve managed to get along with her as well as you have. She even bought you dinner once when you forgot to bring something to eat.

Heather’s rearranging the employee corkboard to make room for the new hires. As the pair of you are making small talk, one of them exits the locker room; your smile drops as you recognize who it is.

Your mind is ignited with the encounter at the Byers’ that night. So much pain is attached to that moment, it’s almost like you can feel it

as the scene replays inside your head. As your last semester became increasingly more difficult, your interactions came to a close. With everyone so worried about completing the year, his interest in you became a distant memory. Neither of you had time to worry about the other.

After months of being rid of him, you're reminded of the fear and panic he instilled in you. You remember the nights where you could barely sleep, afraid he would manage to find you in your dreams. If he didn't infiltrate your mind then, he would be lying in wait at the school. You were haunted by his presence wherever you went.

And now he's here too.

Heather begins to introduce you, "I don't think you two've-

"Oh we have," Billy says, "Don't worry."

The wink he sends towards Heather makes your stomach churn. His mannerisms make it appear like you two are old friends; she would never be able to guess the true nature of your relationship.

"What a coincidence," You drawl, convinced that his sudden employment at your place of work can't be an accident.

Billy laughs at your response as he takes a step closer, "On the contrary, I had no idea. But you've got to admit-"

Both of you watch as Heather leaves you two alone, and your anxiety begins to climb. In an instant, Billy's demeanor flips to the one you're most familiar with; sly, crude, and cunning. He continues, voice dipped in a wicked tone, "This is much more fun."

You bite down on your teeth, anger spreading rapidly through your veins. You're never going to be rid of him and his devilish ways, it seems.

Your answer is laced with contempt, "Don't count on it."

As you turn to leave through the crowd, you feel his eyes burning through the back of your skull. It leaves you feeling disgusted, overwhelmed by his reintroduction into your life, coated in a layer of

filth. It'll take a lot more to get rid of him this time.

A burst of cold chills your skin as you enter Starcourt Mall. It's swarming with people, all escaping the blazing summer heat by milling through in the air conditioned shops. Every chain you could think of resides inside, from Orange Julius to Sam Goody - Starcourt has everything. It's not surprising that most of the residents of Hawkins have begun spending so much time here.

The air in Scoops Ahoy is scented like brown sugar and vanilla, almost like it's being pumped through with the air conditioning. You're a bit shocked that there isn't a line, considering the temperature outside; only two of the tables are filled. And there's nobody at the register.

You strain your neck to glance around the counter, but there isn't anyone behind there either. As you raise a finger to ring the small silver bell, a crashing sound comes from the back room. It wasn't loud enough to snap the customers from their conversations, but it furrows your brow with confusion. A muffled female voice echoes from behind the door, immediately followed by one you know to be Steve's.

The table is covered in small plastic cups. On one side, there is a stack in the shape of a pyramid; Steve is trying to rebuild the remnants of another. A girl dressed in a variation of the sailor uniform sits across from him while scribbling on a whiteboard.

You recognize her from one of your classes a couple years ago. While you can't quite recall which one, you remember that she did a peer review on an essay of yours. The name scrawled at the top comes to your mind - Robin Buckley.

"Hold on, don't count that. I'm not done," Steve says as he quickly works to balance a new row. A few of the white cups tumble down, knocking more to the table. Robin snickers before grabbing a different color and her face beams with pride.

"And *that* is exactly why speed will *never* beat precision," She adds.

The marker squeaks as she writes something else down, and Steve's frustration becomes palpable.

"Slow shift, huh?" You finally speak, breaking through their conversation; both of their heads snap up at your comment. Neither of them had heard or seen you enter. They were too focused on their competition to notice anything else.

Steve's relieved to see you. After hours of Robin's dry humor at his expense, your presence is practically a breath of fresh air.

"Unfortunately," Robin grumbles as she turns her attention back to the whiteboard, "But the dingus did manage to get his ass beat at cup stacking, so I guess it wasn't a total waste."

Steve rolls his eyes as she props it up against the counter, displaying her considerable lead through a series of tally marks. A small giggle leaves your lips at the sight of the scoreboard, decorated with various colors and sketches. It's a perfect expression of the boredom experienced by the employees at Scoops.

With Robin's back turned to the table, Steve takes the opportunity to knock over her pyramid of cups. She flips him off as she returns to her seat.

"You never told me there was a hat," You tease as you gesture to the one Robin wears. Her wit is lightning fast, replying almost instantly, "Probably because it ruins the work he does to get all that volume."

You stifle a laugh behind your hand. Steve, who had gotten up to grab you a chair, looks rather offended by her comment, "Hey! I worked hard for this, thank you."

Much to Steve's disdain, you and Robin have only continued to grow closer as the summer carries on. But with Hargrove's employment at the pool, Steve supposes that he shouldn't be too angry with you for getting along with Robin. That still doesn't mean he has to like her.

It's become a habit of yours to head right to Starcourt after lifeguard duty. The combined company of your favorite ice cream scoopers acts as a cleanser after whatever shit Billy tried to pull during your shift.

"I brought lunch!" You exclaim, raising the bag of fast food into the air. Robin's head pops into view through the window behind the register.

"You're a lifesaver, truly," She says, throwing the sailor cap off her head as you join her in the back room, "There's only so many malts I can drink before I need real food."

Robin's bored expression cracks as you start pulling out her favorite order: a double cheeseburger with chili fries, plus a large Mountain Dew. She prefers when you grab lunch; Robin swears Steve forgets her soda on purpose.

"What'd the dingus get?" Robin asks after thanking you. Your face scrunches up as you remove the plastic cup from the tray, "That New Coke bullshit. Can't believe he actually drinks that."

She studies you with a smirk, leaning back against the counter before taking a large swig of her sugary beverage. The left corner of your mouth always curls up when you talk about Steve; he nervously rubs the back of his neck when he mentions you. There's no way that's a coincidence, Robin thinks.

"Looks like you're stuck with me for a bit, Henderson. Your boyfriend's grabbing the inventory shipment. He'll be back in a minute."

You roll your eyes, looking over to see the girl fiddling with the choker around her neck, "Would you stop that already? Cut it out."

Robin's brow raises - you didn't deny it right away this time.

Lying to your friends like this is starting to wear you down. Before, it was exciting to share this secret with Steve. Seven months later it's starting to feel like a chore. All you want to do is let everyone know exactly the reason why you're so happy.

You sigh, running a hand through your hair, "He's not... he's not my boyfriend okay? We're just friends, that's all."

Robin's grin grows even larger, "So we're just... not gonna talk about what happened last week then?"

Your face pinches in confusion as you toss the paper bag into the trash can, “Uh, what happened last week?”

“When you left with him on his break and came back with that hickey, you idiot!”

Your jaw drops before spinning to her. She cackles at your expression, and the way your voice cracks when you shout at her, “You saw that?”

“Oh please,” Robin says as she grabs a few fries between her fingers, “You two really aren’t that subtle. You just think you’re slick.”

Her direct approach to conversation always catches you off guard; this is one of those times. Words are no longer forming in your mouth. You’re just standing there, gaping at her as she eats, unable to come up with a response.

“At least try to hide it for my sake please,” Robin adds, wiping her hands on a napkin, “I don’t wanna think about Harrington playing tonsil hockey with anyone, let alone you. You’re too cool for him.”

As if on cue, Steve enters through the staff entrance with a couple of cardboard boxes; Robin wiggles her brows in your direction, making your cheeks blush red in record time. You wonder how long it took for her to realize the true nature of your relationship with Steve. By the way your face burns with embarrassment, you figure it couldn’t have taken too much time - Robin’s unnaturally observant.

While Steve can’t deny that Robin has been growing on him (in large part to your high praise of her), the shifts without her are much more bearable. Mainly because of you.

The sailor hat is ripped from his head as soon as the door swings open. Steve’s tired gaze instantly lands on where you sit, a grin growing over your face at how exasperated he seems. You can’t help but tease him, “How’s the ship look, Captain?”

Steve scoffs at the nickname before motioning towards you with the cap in hand, “You’re *hilarious*.”

His tone expresses no amusement in the slightest, but his brightening

features would suggest otherwise. Your smile is infectious, even with his deflated mood.

“Oh come on,” You whine, poking his arm in an attempt to provoke him, “I like making fun of you. It’s really easy.”

Steve doesn’t respond right away. Instead, he remembers something that occurred to him earlier - when a particular redhead purchased a strawberry cone.

“Can I ask you something?” Steve asks as he passively tosses the white hat onto the table. Your good disposition drops a bit at the way he says it, almost weak. A bit of anxiety begins to set you on edge with his request, but you indulge him nonetheless, “Of course.”

Steve pauses again, averting his eyes from you as he thinks. He inhales, “You never did tell me why you agreed to go out with Hargrove.”

You aren’t sure what you expected, but it certainly wasn’t that. You’re flooded with relief, relaxing back into the chair, “Wasn’t aware you wanted to know. Why?”

Steve shrugs, trying not to look bothered but you can tell that your brief history with Billy gets under his skin just a little. You don’t blame him. There isn’t a day that passes where you don’t regret it.

“Max was in here before,” He gestures out towards the counter, “Just reminded me, that’s all.”

Steve doesn’t continue, just fiddles with his fingers in his lap. He understands that he doesn’t exactly have a right to know, and he acknowledges that you might want to keep it in the past. After all, it was *Hargrove*.

You sigh, already feeling a surge of shame start to form. That was definitely not one of your finer moments, “I mean... I thought you had just rejected me.”

Steve clears his throat, still feeling apologies climbing up at the memory. He’s apologized a thousand times and he would a thousand more if you’d let him.

“And I don’t know! He complimented my project and it was just... nice to have someone notice something that you didn’t think anyone would care about, yeah?”

Steve’s brows knit together, standing up at your words, “Wait, that’s what convinced you? Because he remembered a detail like that?”

You nod and Steve huffs, slumping into the chair beside you, “Wow, I really know nothing about picking up girls.”

You grin, a teasing tone in your voice, “I know. It’s kind of hard to believe you were ever the King of Hawkins.”

Steve scoffs and smacks you playfully on the shoulder, an offended look on his features, “Hey, alright! I had some great moves back in the day.”

“I don’t think they worked as well as you thought they did,” Your smile only grows, not convinced at all.

Steve chooses to ignore your comment, “Besides, I noticed stuff about you all the time. Didn’t realize I had to tell you that.”

Your eyebrows raise in surprise, “Oh yeah? Like what?”

Steve frowns for a moment as he thinks, “Like when you study, you color coordinate for the different subjects. Blue for English, red for math and green for biology. You even had highlighters to match.”

Your jaw drops a bit in astonishment, realizing how close he must have been watching to notice something like that; you’re fairly sure your ears are red from how flustered you feel. But Steve’s not watching your reaction, he’s still wracking his brain for something else.

“Whenever you listen to any Queen song, you sing along to the lyrics even if you don’t know it,” Steve grins as he recalls the time he caught you mumbling along when the two of you were on a midnight drive.

He continues on, counting on his fingers and you’re speechless, “Even though you don’t like pineapple on pizza, Dustin does so you order it

anyways.”

“And you don’t completely trust my driving skills because whenever I shift into third, you grip the seats just a little bit and-”

Steve doesn’t get to finish his sentence, your lips interrupt him as you pull him close to kiss him. It’s an awkward position, leaning off your chair to bring him closer but you don’t even care. Your lips are twitching, trying to smile because he noticed everything.

Pulling back, you pant softly to catch your breath, blowing a strand of hair from your face. Steve smiles, cheeks rosy, “Believe me now?”